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ABSTRACT

This paper offers arguments against some aspects of both the push toward a marketable curriculum and the extremes of student-centered teaching. The author uses as an example her own experiences teaching freshman composition telecourses at an off-campus location. The courses were offered at Inver Hills Community College, Minnesota, a small Midwestern college with a population of 4,900 students. Students at Inver Hills can choose from six community colleges in the area. Only 9% of students are of color, while 66% of students are female, and more than 30% of students are over the age of 25. The telecourse was an 8-week session that combined 4 weekly classroom hours with four hours of watching videos. The courses are meant to serve the needs of working adults, but the author argues that she felt too rushed, and wondered if the students had actually received or earned four credits worth of education. In addition, the off-campus site was inhospitable for a classroom situation. The Inver Hills program is supported by the League for Innovation in the Community College, a major proponent of the learning college movement. The author finds the learning acquired in these programs to be difficult to quantify. Additionally, the author argues that the emphasis on marketable curriculum may override the community college mission to provide general education that teaches students to think critically. (NB)

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From the Knish to the Hotdish: How Community Colleges Cater to Regional Tastes

Perhaps the most crucial ingredient for the Midwestern delicacy called the Hotdish is Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup. Its high sodium content coupled with its ability to congeal any substance to itself makes it an irreplaceable food product in the Midwest. Depending on what region of the Midwest you're from, Cream of Mushroom soup can be combined with ground beef, tater tots, and onion to create Tater Tot Hot Dish; for Tuna Noodle Hotdish, just combine Cream of Mushroom soup with tuna and, of course, noodles. In certain parts of Northern Minnesota, tuna and beef are often substituted with rabbit or deer, giving the traditional hotdish a gamey flavor that suits the local palate. By contrast, the Knish—a New York favorite--is a traditional Jewish delicacy that takes seasoned mashed potatoes and wraps it in a pastry shell. While you can order a Knish that contains an assortment of other vegetables or meats, this dish still retains its simple and distinctive ethnic flavor. Although I could spend hours sharing local recipes with you, that abstract I sent in last May mentioned something about regional tastes and community college. So what's the connection between the Knish, Hotdish, and the Community College? It's about serving up what's familiar, what's comfortable, and what's convenient. In academic terms, it means giving our students what they often say they hunger for. No matter where I've taught—whether at Long Island's Nassau Community College, with its 20,000 student body, or St. Paul's Inver Hills Community College, with its student body of 4,000,--many students will tell me they chose their respective colleges for the same reason: it is a "cheap

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and convenient" education. Whether students are served up hot dish or knish, however, largely depends on the college's size, the average age of its students and the type of relationship the college has with area businesses.

Historically, the community college has the reputation among other types of colleges for being the most responsive and innovative to the needs of its surrounding community. As David Maurrusse explains in his book *Beyond the Campus*, "The primary relationship between community colleges and their surrounding communities is rooted in the provision of accessible education and certification. Community colleges train local populations in various trades." Often times these students will bring the knowledge and training they gained from the college back into their neighborhoods and communities, thus making the community college's relationship with its locales, intimate and interwoven This intimacy with the local community is crucial, but complex, for catering to local needs can certainly strengthen the college's practical importance in the community; however, it can also exert a harmful pressure on our mission to promote the liberal arts, an area of our curriculum that is not often "marketable" to our local businesses.

I witness this push toward a marketable curriculum most prominently at my current community college. The reasons for this push stem largely from demographics. Unlike Nassau Community College on Long Island with its enrollment size of 20,000, Inver Hills, my current college, is much smaller; it has 4900 students; Whereas NCC is the only community college in Nassau County, a county that is home to1.3 million residents, Inver Hills is located in a southern suburb of St. Paul, Inver Grove Heights, which has a population of 30,000+. Nearly 80% of the students who attend Nassau Community College make Nassau county their home. By contrast, students at Inver Hills who live

within the Twin Cities Metro Area may travel as far as 45 minutes to attend the school. As such Inver Hills must compete with five other community colleges in the Twin City Metro Area for students whereas Nassau Community College is the only choice available in its county for a community college education. Beyond enrollment, perhaps the most important differences have to do with race, gender and age. Whereas 38% of the students at Nassau are students of color, they only account for 9% of the students at Inver Hills. In terms of gender and age, 66% of our students at Inver Hills are female and more than thirty percent of our students are over the age of twenty five whereas and 53% of the students are female at Nassau and less than twenty percent of the students are over the age of 25. These major demographic differences between the colleges, I think allow Nassau to offer students greater selection of programs and courses and maintain its independence from local pressures from businesses. That is, they can offer their students the knish, a traditional liberal arts education that provides a diversity of courses without regard to marketability or technology. Their younger student body and their larger enrollment make it nearly impossible to provide up to date classrooms with computers or even vcrs; there also seems to be little pressure for online courses. While more than one hundred courses at Nassau were web enhanced in the Fall of 2002, only eight courses were taught online. Inver Hills seems like a direct opposite. Its smaller student enrollment and older student population place greater pressure on the college to generate more resources for technology in the classroom. Every classroom on campus has a television vcr, overhead projector, and many classrooms that include computers. This emphasis on technology, however, often comes at the expense of the liberal arts; hence, Inver Hills provides its students with more of a

hotdish approach to education—academically bland, but technologically accessible. And it's this hotdish approach to education that I would like to explore in this paper.

One of the ways Inver Hills appeals to students' desire for accessibility and convenience is through a program called the Adult Success Through Accelerated Program. This program offers returning students accelerated courses, telecourses, online courses, and many off campus locations. A telecourse is an accelerated course that requires students to watch 4 hours of videos each week and attend four hours of class during an 8 week time span. In addition in the Fall of 2002, Inver Hills offered ten online courses (in various disciplines biology, economics, English, and Sociology); twelve telecourses; and twenty three off campus classes at eight different sites. Roughly twenty five percent of our English courses are either online, telecourses, or traditional classes held at off campus locations. And like that cream of mushroom soup that flavors our regional hotdish, the course offerings are pretty bland: The Research Paper, Introduction to Computers, Introduction to Literature, Interpersonal Communications etc. Certainly this program provides the type of diet that many nontraditional students crave (affordability, accessibility), but what these students are promised and what they actually receive don't always match.

For the past two fall semesters I have taught two four credit freshman composition telecourses at off campus locations. Essentially the class allows students to finish the course in a half semester's time. Such an arrangement is highly valued by these working adults, but as you can perhaps already guess, the course is a nightmare to teach. Before you can get the words "thesis statement" out of your mouth, students have already turned in essay number two; and forget about revision or responding critically to texts and ideas. There's simply no time. And the videos do little to appease the situation. Often mind

numbing and tedious, they contain a pseudo Mike Wallace who conducts a mock interview with a well known composition theorist. While the interview is often broken up by a live case study of a student brainstorming topic ideas for his/her composition course or meeting with a professor, most of the tape is carried by the esteemed comp theorist. And as you all know, experts though comp theorist might be, television stars they are not. Gray suited experts droning about rhetorical patterns and the like only confirm students' worst imaginings about the subject of writing. At the end of the course, I'm often left feeling dissatisfied with my teaching; I feel too rushed, dishonest that the students haven't really received or earned 4 credits worth of an education. My students, however, are generally pleased; they obtained a bit more knowledge about writing than they began with and they've earned four credits; mission accomplished. What they've missed, of course, is a chance to digest the information that's been thrown at them, a time to reconsider their ideas and language, and an opportunity to work closely in one-on-one conferences with their instructor—all prospects that are provided to my students in 16 week composition courses.

Besides the short changed aspects of these courses, there's another dilemma that presents itself: the actual site of the course. Currently Inver Hills works in close partnership with area businesses within a radius of 20 miles or so, who provide the school with the classrooms to house their courses. For the most part, the facilities that I've taught in have been well-equipped for my composition course: overhead projectors, a ver, large dry erase boards, comfortable chairs and tables. But if by chance that crucial element of communication between the college and the business is impaired, the results are not pretty. This semester failed communication between the school and the business landed my composition class in the atrium of an open-aired four story building that housed a county

library and court house. Twenty students sat at tables and chairs permanently arranged in cafe style seating while I stood in front of them with a small easel and paper, but sadly for me, no marker. The first night we met at the atrium, we looked at one another with amazement. "I paid $482 dollars for this," one of the students quipped as he plopped his books down at one of the tables. I suggested we channel our frustration into writing a letter to the dean requesting a change of venues. We began by brainstorming our ideas about what made for an appropriate classroom. I asked them to concentrate on all the information we knew for certain about our current dilemma. Their brainstorming included such comments as "It's too difficult to hear or see one another." "There's someone vacuuming behind me," and "People are staring at us." The letters were written, but the school did little to correct the situation; it took the help of a student in the course who found us a space to meet at her workplace. Hardly a professional way to offer an education.

Telecourse, off campus courses, and online courses are obvious examples of ways our curriculum is packaged to satisfy the appetites of returning adult working students. But perhaps the most insidious way cream of mushroom soup is served up to our students is through a program that on our campus is called the Liberal Studies/Professional Skills program. The program claims "to helps students make a connection between the skills they learn in their courses and the applicability of these skills to their world," a practical goal for a community college. Students who choose to participate in the program are assessed for ten essential skills which range from the nebulous sounding Appreciation skills and Material skills to Technology and Conceptual skills. The LS/PS program promotes itself to entering students as "a value-added program that allows you to distinguish yourself from

other college students by showing others and yourself what you are able to do." The "others" that students need to impress are, of course, employers. The LS/PS website includes quotes from employers praising the program. One employer gushes, saying "It is critical in today's world that we have a highly trained workforce. This is a program that employers have been waiting years for." At the end of the program, students can provide potential employers with a student skills profile, a summary of achievement in sub-skills within each of the ten skills, a list of courses and activities in which those skills were developed, or a portfolio with examples of projects completed.

Our program at Inver Hills is supported by a nationally based organization called the League for Innovation in the Community College, a major backer of what's referred to as the learning-college movement. According to an October 2001 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 95 percent of the nation's 1,200 community colleges claim to be on board the movement. In the article one instructor explains how she used learning centered teaching techniques in her literature course. On the first day of the class rather than handing out a syllabus she instead asks the students which authors they prefer reading and which writing format they prefer to use (journals, essays etc.). She says in the article, "It doesn't make a difference to me whether we read Shakespeare or Marlow. When you involve students in the design of the course, they take more responsibility for their learning." Getting students to take a more active role in their learning is certainly an admirable goal for any instructor, but handing over the design and content of the course completely to students seems to me irresponsible on the part of the instructor. I try to involve students as much as possible in various aspects of the course—they provide valuable input during individual and group presentations as well as in larger classroom

discussions, but since my college pays me for my expertise in a certain subject, my students deserve the guidance and knowledge I can provide them. This means, ultimately, that I should take responsibility for my own course content. To be fair, I should mention that this particular example of student involvement is a bit extreme even for the learning college movement. The liberal studies/professional studies program that I mentioned earlier is a more moderate model that has some loyal supporters. One instructor at my college who has used the model explained to me that "it was a way to give students acknowledgement for the skills they developed in my class." Like my colleague, other supporters of the learning college movement are finding one unlikely ally: the state legislature. As Frank Newman, a professor of policy at Brown University puts it this learning college movement is "a reaction to market forces' as well as "a response to the fact that lawmakers are increasingly frustrated with higher education because they think it's not responsive to the needs of society." The nation-wide debate about accountability in education has certainly fueled the learning college push toward outcome based education.

Quantifying the learning that is occurring in classrooms, however, is often difficult and the rubrics given to instructors who participate in the program may simplify the process, but don't always reflect the individual student's learning. As Matthew Militich, an English instructor at Itasca Community College puts it: "No matter how well we teach, learning rests finally with the learner and this is as it should be. No more important moment comes for a learner than that in which she is struck forcefully and clearly, by the notion that she and only she is responsible for her learning. . . No quantification can account for this revelation, but learners know when it occurs, and afterwards they value worthy instructors as guides and allies. Such an immeasurable outcome is worth more than

any portfolio of objective data." Unfortunately the appeal for this objective data is painfully real, especially to those local and legislative interests that want community college to explain their value in market terms. Thus the student skills profile, with its detailed, but generic descriptions of the activities and projects that students have completed in each of their courses, appears to guarantee that students acquired the skills necessary. It places a definitive stamp of approval on the student's transcript, stating clearly that this student is ready for the workforce and that he/she will make a competent and qualified employee.

Historically, community colleges have often included job training as one of their larger missions. But an overwhelming emphasis on marketable curriculum may eventually override our other missions to provide general education that teaches students to think critically and analytically about a body of knowledge and to promote lifelong learning. It seems as if this trend toward job training is already occurring nation wide. As John S. Levin notes in a 2000 article , "In the 1990s, the mission of the community college had less emphasis on education and more on training, less emphasis upon community social needs and more on the economic needs of business and industry, less upon individual development and more upon workforce preparation and retraining. In short, the mission of the community college by the end of the twentieth century was more suited to the rhetoric of the global economy and to its demands." While online courses, telecourses, and movements like the learning community recognize the diverse needs of our students within a global economy we must ask ourselves to what extent do we want these types of courses to become the main entrée we offer students? Do we want to make convenience, accessibility, and employability the 3 main ingredients for a community college education?

The great irony of this emphasis on marketability is that many of the students I teach are not often satiated by a hot dish education; many of them have already come out of that workforce; they've understood clearly what a market economy values. As one of my students recently said of her corporation, "The company tells you just enough information to do a certain task, but they don't explain their larger goals or motivations. They want to keep you dumb and replaceable." These folks want something beyond job training or retraining for that matter. Many of them see education as a chance to increase not only their salary, but their intellect and knowledge. They are hungry to know, but they are enticed to enroll in courses that don't offer them a substantial diet. Whenever I teach telecourses or off campus courses, the students come up to me in droves after each class meeting; they wish to learn more information about a certain author or subject matter; they yearn to share more of their insights and ideas; they want to know how to make their papers better. But their hotdish education provides little opportunity to diversify their knowledge, to experiment with new ideas, or reconsider traditional recipes of thought. By the time they've finally indigested a course on the Principles of Management they're half way through another course in Professional Speaking. This style of education hardly seems ideal for anyone—educators or students, but many community college students have come to accept it as a necessary reality. Right now these students realize that these marketable courses are as good as it get; they can't afford to devote themselves to a full course load and are left to settle for an education that ultimately leaves them hungry.

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